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ABSTRACT

Results of a study involving an experimental and a control group of first-semester, college students in a required language course concern the use of the French dictee in the classroom as a testing and teaching technique. Performance on written and oral examinations indicates that dictation practice stimulates awareness of the written language, but does not automatically imply proficiency in knowledge of grammatical constructions or oral comprehension. (RL)

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The Use of the Dictée in the French Language Classroom

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THE dictée, while employed in varying degrees in language classes taught in the United States, holds an established position in French education. From the earliest grades, spelling tests are never lists of isolated words, but rather selected passages by well-known authors. Thus the student, while developing an ear for the harmonies of French prose, is examined on his knowledge of orthography and his understanding of grammatical agreements.

In the case of the non-native speaker, the dictée introduces two additional factors: discrimination of sounds and general comprehension. The beginning student must learn, for example, to distinguish between *le* and *les*, between *tu* and *tout*. Moreover, on correctly hearing the phonetic word [parle], the student must grasp the meaning of the sentence in order to choose among the possible written forms: *parlé*, *parler*, *parlez*, or even *parlais* and *parlait*. Often the dictée is employed not only as a method of examining the student, but often as a means of learning. The students are encouraged to correct their own papers as the teacher repeats difficult sounds, emphasizes sentence structure, stimulates student awareness of grammatical agreements, and explains the meaning of troublesome passages.

In the following experiment we do not question the use of the dictée in the American classroom. Rather we propose to examine the role of the dictée in conjunction with the audio-lingual approach to language learning. First, what are the requisite conditions under which the dictée may be employed as a valid form of general examination? With what students is it most successful? With which teaching methods? Secondly, what are the areas of language proficiency most benefited by regular daily practice in dictation? Does a high score on the dictée

automatically imply overall language fluency? Or are certain skills isolated and cultivated at the expense of others? Although this experiment was carried out among first-semester college students, the results should be applicable to first-year high school classes.

I. Procedure

A. *Nature of the course*

At the University of South Florida where this study was carried out, the foreign languages are considered one of the Basic College courses, six out of seven of which are required of all entering students. In each section of first-year French, the student met three periods a week with his instructor and supplemented the classroom work with three half-hour language laboratory periods. During the first semester, thirty-three lessons of Rosselot's *Je Parle Français* were completed.

B. *Grouping the students*

Each student registered for the section which best fitted his schedule, the maximum limit for any class being thirty students. During the semester under consideration, there were six sections of beginning French whose final enrollment came to 120 students. Half of the sections were taught by professor A (Group A) and half by professor B (Group B). The students were unaware of this grouping.

Since the language course is required, the students possess widely varying degrees of ability and motivation. However, because this study did not focus on individual performance, it was necessary to verify only the mean academic potential of each group. The comparison of high school grade point averages (GPA) of both groups showed no significant statistical differences between A and B.[1]

C. *Manner of instruction*

From the outset the instruction was in French. During the typical classroom period the film was shown first and the dialogue drilled; new terms and phrases were explained in French. The film was shown again after which time questions were asked. Grammatical patterns were drilled within the context in which they appeared in the dialogue.

The sections differed in one essential respect. In Group A a dictée from a previous lesson was given at almost every class meeting. In Group B only three or four dictées were given during the semester.

D. *Examination procedure*

A common final examination prepared by the Office of Evaluation Services was given to all sections simultaneously. The student's score on this examination determined fifty percent of his final grade; the other fifty percent was dependent on the instructor evaluation.

The examination was divided into four parts.

Part I: Oral Comprehension (50 multiple-choice questions)

A. Differentiation of sounds (1–5)
Example number 1:
Tape: J'y vais.
Booklet:
1. J'y vais.
2. J'en veux.
3. Je vais.

B. Comprehension (6–35)
Example number 2:
Tape: Je voudrais boire . . .
Booklet:
1. des prières.
2. de l'eau.
3. du lit.

C. Short passages (36–50)
Three short passages were read twice. The student was to indicate whether the related statements in the booklet were 1) true, 2) false, or 3) whether it was impossible to make a judgment.

Part II: Dictée (20 points, one-half point deducted for each error)

The fifty-word passage was read four times over the tape: once rapidly, twice slowly, and then rapidly. The dictée was hand scored. Any type of mistake in a given word, or its omission, was counted as an error. Only one error per word was allowed.

Part III: Grammar (55 multiple-choice questions; no tape)

Example number 3:
Il étudie—histoire
1. son
2. sa
3. se
4. s'
5. ses

Part IV: Written Forms (30 points, two per sentence)

A. Questions to be answered in the affirmative (1–5)

[1] The Office of Institutional Research at this university has found the GPA to present the most reliable index for predicting academic success.

Example: Comprenez-vous le français? Ans: Je le comprends.

B. Questions to be answered in the negative (6–10)
Example: Partez-vous demain? Ans: Je ne pars pas demain.

C. Directed imperatives (11–15)

Example: Dites à Jean de venir ici. Ans: Venez ici.

(The maximum possible score for the examination was 155 points, of which 105 were machine scored and 50 hand scored.)

II. Data

A. *Correlation coefficients*

As a preliminary step, the dictée score for each student was paired off against his score on the rest of the examination. The resulting correlation coefficients are as follows:

Group A:	.78
Group B:	.89

It was immediately apparent that there was a much closer correlation of partial scores among the students in Group B.

B. *First partial analysis*

For each part of the examination, the mean score was calculated by considering the performance of all 120 students.

Table I

Machine score (maximum 105)	Mean: 60.7
Dictée (maximum 20)	Mean: 11.6
Written sentences (maximum 30)	Mean: 15.3

Subsequently those students who fell above the mean were separated from those who fell below. The results were further divided according to groups.

Table II

	Group A		Group B	
	Above mean	Below mean	Above mean	Below mean
Machine Score	33	35	24	28
Dictée	46	22	23	29
Sentences	39	29	23	29

From this tabulation it was obvious that the students in Group B maintained fairly consistent scores on the three parts of the examination. That Group A performed relatively better on the dictée was to be expected; the difference is statistically significant at the one-percent level. However, whereas this proficiency in dictation influenced the score on the written sentences (but not to a statistically significant degree), it seemingly had no beneficial effect on student performance on the machine-scored part of the examination.

C. *Second partial analysis*

The machine score was subsequently broken into two components: oral comprehension and grammar. The mean scores for the total sample are as follows:

Table III

Oral comprehension (maximum 50)	Mean: 27.9
Grammar (maximum 55)	Mean: 32.9

The group analysis gave the following results:

Table IV

	Group A		Group B	
	Above mean	Below mean	Above mean	Below mean
Oral comprehension	29	39	23	29
Grammar	34	34	25	27

The students in Group B do not deviate significantly from the pattern established in Table II. It is curious to note, however, that Group A was proportionately much weaker in oral comprehension.

III. Conclusion

The interpretation of the examination data permits us to delineate the actual role of the dictée in the language classroom. The following statements, it must be remembered, may only be validly applied to situations where French is taught by a predominantly audio-lingual method.

A. *The dictée as a testing technique*

It is evident that the dictée, when administered as an examination, tests the student's proficiency in committing to paper the phrases

read. Moreover, this proficiency improves with regular practice. However, if the dictée is to comprise the urique test to determine the student's overall knowledge of French, this can be done *only* in classes where little classroom time is devoted to dictation. To conclude, for students drilled in dictation practice, the score on the dictée reflects only their skill in that area; for students possessing minimal experience with dictation, the dictée can validly be substituted for the traditional final examination in first-semester French, thus saving many hours of grading time.

B. *The dictée as a teaching technique*

The efficacy of daily dictation practice can be inferred from the performance of the students of Group A on the final examination. Frequent dictées stimulate student awareness of the written language, as is indicated by Group A's markedly higher score on the written sentences (Part IV of the examination). However, the same students performed less well when they themselves had to determine what was to be written. Their knowledge of grammatical constructions was no greater than that of the students deprived of repeated dictée practice. Moreover, it is surprising to note that Group A's oral comprehension was definitely inferior; the ability to isolate individual sounds, as evidenced by high scores on the dictée, did not correlate with comprehension of phrases read at a normal tempo.

Proficiency in dictation does not, therefore, automatically imply proficiency in other aspects of French language learning, at least in first semester of instruction. The results of this study would indicate that it is unwise to devote too much time to dictation in beginning French classes.

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